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ABSTRACT

The authors consider the problem of special education teacher burnout and suggest administrative approaches to dealing with the problem. Personnel management strategies, such as specifying the role and student load for special educators, providing a complete job description to new staff, and providing support for staff (especially during the first year of adjustment) are suggested. Among organizational management options listed are developing efficient procedures; providing time, money, and staff involvement in policy modification and revision; and developing a comprehensive personnel development program. (CL)

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PREVENTING TEACHER BURNOUT: SUGGESTIONS FOR EFFICIENTLY MEETING PL 94-142 MANDATES AND PROVIDING FOR STAFF SURVIVAL

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PREVENTING TEACHER BURNOUT:
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The problem of burnout among special educators was a non-issue as recently as three or four years ago. Discussions with special education leadership personnel during the mid-70's resulted in quizzical looks when asked about teacher burnout. As we entered the 80's, on the other hand, entire professional journals (Pointer, 1980) focus on the issue of teacher burnout, and conference sessions on the topic result in standing-room-only crowds. In recent months we get calls from perplexed school administrators who say, "Teacher burnout was the highest rated topic on my personnel development needs assessment. What can I do about it?" It would seem that something has changed the perception, if not the experience, of special educators in the last five years. At this time, it is important for us to assess what leadership personnel can do about burnout among special educators. The purpose of this paper will be to begin the discussion on this problem.

The Problem

Burnout can be defined as the end result of unsuccessful attempts to cope with a variety of negative stress conditions. The stressors causing concern identified by general education personnel focus on the students. These include vandalism, changing school populations, school violence, and class size (McGuire, 1979; Stevenson & Milt, 1975). The stressful conditions for special educators, on the other hand, would seem to relate to the manner in which the mandates of Public Law 94-142 have

been implemented in the period 1975 to 1980 (Bensky, Shaw, Gouse, Bates, Dixon & Beane, 1980).

Stress may create a positive (heightened awareness, improved functioning) or negative (flight, fear, exhaustion) response. The current indications are that stress reactions of special educators are resulting in rapid staff turnover, interpersonal problems between professional groups (e.g., regular and special educators and administrators), and resistance to change (D'Alonzo & Wiseman, 1978; Morsink, Blackhurst & Williams, 1979; Ryor, 1978). In addition, non-productive approaches to dealing with stress used by special educators have been found to include providing less direct service to children, lowering expectations for students, taking drugs (liquor, pills, etc.) as well as resigning (Dixon, Shaw & Bensky, 1980). It is clear that these non-productive approaches to dealing with stress result in a reduction in the quantity and quality of services provided the handicapped. They are also testimony to the physical, psychological, and spiritual exhaustion of increasing numbers of special educators.

Stressors

In response to the concerns described above and in an attempt to evaluate whether Public Law 94-142 implementation is related to burnout, data were collected from educators in Connecticut (Bensky, Shaw, Gouse, Bates, Dixon & Beane, 1980). The data indicated that the best predictors of perceived stress for special educators were "clear-role expectations and discrepancy between teacher's perception of role vs. others' expectations of the teacher's role." Therefore, the better the special educator understood

his/her job expectations, the more perceived stress was decreased. On the other hand, the perception of job-related stress was increased by a discrepancy between the special educator's expectations and others' expectations for his/her educational role. It is important to note that the two role clarity variables discussed above have more impact on stress than do all the task specific stressors to be discussed below. The specific factors creating stress for special educators include job related work after hours, writing IEP's/due process paperwork, dealing with parents, pupil load, diagnosis and dealing with other teachers.

It is necessary for supervisors and administrators to realize that the variability of the data indicate that stressful factors will differentially affect their staff members. Individuals certainly have a differential ability to deal with stress and different roles (special class vs. resource room teachers) have varying kinds and degrees of stress affecting them. It is, therefore, necessary to assess both individual and organizational stress (Dixon, Shaw & Bensky, 1980).

Dealing With The Problem

There is a growing body of literature (Gmelch, 1978; Moe, 1979; Sparks, 1979; Styles & Cavanaugh, 1977) describing approaches for those in the "helping professions" to deal with the problem of burnout. Recommendations generally include proper diet, physical fitness, relaxation training, and developing outside interests. We will attempt, however, to focus on particular approaches leadership personnel should consider to manage stress and prevent burnout among special educators.

The approaches to be discussed focus on personnel and organizational management.

The general assessment strategies recommended by Dixon, Shaw & Bensky (1980) should be used to identify the specific groups of individuals or elements of the organization which require support. They also suggest approaches for evaluating the success of interventions which have been tried.

Personnel Management

1. Provide a professional and accountable means to specify the role and student load for special educators. This could be done after the Individualized Education Programs are written for each student in the school. The special educator could then meet with his/her supervisor to negotiate a job description for the year. In addition to direct service (teaching contact hours with handicapped children), responsibilities for diagnosis, placement team meetings, due process paperwork, consulting, and so on can be specified. This would provide for clarification and negotiation of all role priorities/needs in a non-crisis situation. The all too typical alternative to this approach is a "battle of wills" between the administrator and special educator regarding placing another child in an overloaded program. This can be even more disastrous if it occurs at a placement team meeting in front of the parents.
2. Ensure that all other school personnel know and understand the agreed upon role and responsibilities for special educators. In addition, make sure that all necessary responsibilities are provided. Is there help

available for regular classroom teachers with mainstreamed children? Are personnel available to do a thorough educational evaluation on referrals?

3. When hiring new staff, provide a complete job description as indicated above. Try to make sure that the people being considered for the job have the ability and willingness to fulfill all the specified responsibilities. In addition, interview procedures should seek to identify persons who seem to have the personal mental health, flexibility, and willingness to learn required of post Public Law 94-142 special educators.
4. New staff members should receive ongoing support during that first critical year of adjustment. A buddy system and periodic "mental health" meetings might be appropriate. It would be helpful to provide training in communication and small group processes as a first step.
5. Provide support for staff so they may productively handle the responsibilities assigned them. Hire an aide or substitute teacher for staff required to attend placement team meetings while providing direct service to students. If a resource teacher is expected to do consulting during the school day, provide an extra aide who can be trained to teach groups in the resource room. Hire extra secretarial time so the school psychologist doesn't spend one day each week typing reports or handling other clerical responsibilities. Although these suggestions seem to require "extra" money in these times of tight budgets and taxpayer revolts, it is our contention that they are cost efficient and effective. Using Public Law 94-142 funds for these relatively low salaried support persons should provide for greater productivity of current staff and may lessen the need to hire permanent new staff members.

6. Administrators should encourage or at least be more open to role modifications, changes, and transfers. We've noticed that after three to five years, many special educators need a change in environment (it may be from resource room to special class or vice versa). In other cases, the special educator may find one particular aspect of his/her job description (e.g., consulting or diagnosis) to be causing stress. Or a transfer to another building might alleviate stress caused by problems associated with certain students, colleagues, or administrators. The changes would cost no money but would likely increase staff productivity.
7. Schools need to be more positive places to both learn and work. To paraphrase a familiar behavioral cliché, "catch a teacher being good." When the teacher develops a new curriculum material, organizes a special instructional unit, teaches a good lesson, succeeds with a particularly difficult child, let him/her know you've noticed. The teacher who gives 100% effort each day <u>should be told</u> that someone does care. The administrator should encourage parents, students, and other teachers to provide positive feedback to one another. The administrator should also seek ways for staff members to be recognized for outstanding efforts or achievements and have special opportunities to learn and grow (e.g., attend conferences or workshops at school expense; plan and implement inservice training programs for extra pay).
8. Support systems must be available to educators coping with the problem of burnout in each school system. This can be formally or informally provided in a number of ways. A school system can include free, confidential counseling to staff members for job related stress as part

of the fringe benefit package. One creative central office administrator with limited fiscal resources made it known that one particularly competent school psychologist was available for staff counseling as part of her job description. Another approach is to provide a comprehensive support system to deal with the total problem -- physical, mental and emotional. It might include one day seminars, extensive workshops and/or ongoing programs on a variety of mental health topics and treatment alternatives. (For more information, contact the Department of Health Promotion, St. Louis University Medical Center.)

Providing a total program that attends to the well being of the entire individual may be initially a costly venture. However, data is bearing out the long range benefits: a decrease in health care costs, an increase in job productivity and performance, better use of professional and personal resources and time. The fact that the business sector is providing this kind of training to its personnel should indicate the attendant benefits.

Programs that go beyond simple stress management techniques are necessary and essential. A program that promotes the entire well being of the individual is one positive alternative. Well being is a state that would include intervention concepts such as: habit control, physical fitness/positive living and stress management and job burnout prevention.

Organizational Management

1. Develop or modify special education policies and procedures so they efficiently fulfill the mandates of Public Law 94-142, particularly those

relating to the placement team process, IEP's, and least restrictive alternative. Most schools are now in "compliance" with the law; the current need is for efficiency to be increased to better meet the needs of handicapped students and professional staff.

2. Provide time, money, and staff involvement in the modification of policies as well as in the revision and streamlining of forms and routines used for meeting the mandates of Public Law 94-142. Deal with concerns such as: Is a 15 page IEP necessary? Do we need all the due process forms we're currently using? Are we "over" interpreting the mandates of the law and therefore following procedures which are neither required nor helpful?
3. Encourage understanding (knowledge) and support (attitude) for those policies and procedures throughout the school system beginning with the Board of Education and working down.
4. Virtually all of the approaches specified in this paper require an inservice training component for their successful implementation. The development and implementation of a comprehensive personnel development program is, therefore, a necessity. The program should provide the necessary knowledge, attitude, and skills for all school constituencies, including the Board of Education, principals, regular and special educators and parents (for more information, see Shaw & Bensky, 1980). Also, ownership of the inservice goals, objectives and activities have been demonstrated to increase participant motivation, generalizability of information, and actual implementation of new skills, knowledge, or attitudes. Having the inservice participants involved in this planning

may be a stress reducing activity in itself.

Various sources of support are available including Public Law 94-142, Teacher Centers, state funds (through State Education Agency inservice funds or competitive state grants) and federal grants (particularly the inservice training grants available through the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped). Cooperative efforts between local education agencies, intermediate education units and institutions of higher education should be explored.

Conclusion

The preliminary data indicate that the problem of stress which results in the burnout of special educators is a current concern. As schools attempt to maintain effective programming for handicapped children during this time of fiscal constraint, runaway inflation and family/societal disintegration, burnout will surely escalate. It is, therefore, important that ongoing assessment of the problem and the success of interventions aimed at dealing with it continue. The goal for leadership personnel during the 1980's will be assuring an appropriate education for each handicapped student while providing a productive and fulfilling career for each special educator.

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